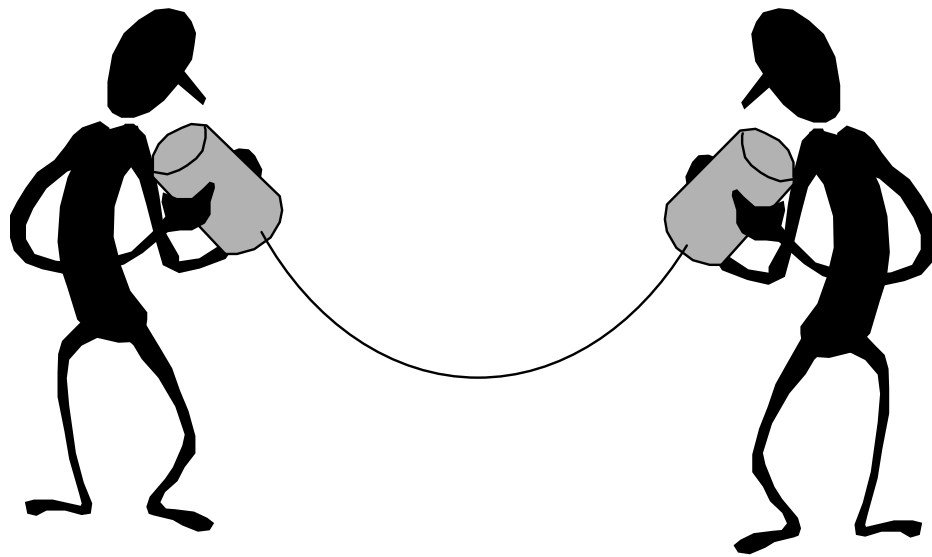


10 Tips for Talking With Kids About Tough Issues



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Introduction

Raising a child is probably the most gratifying job any of us will ever have -- and one of the toughest. In large part, that's because times have changed. We live in an increasingly complex world that challenges us everyday with a wide range of disturbing issues that are difficult for children to understand and for adults to explain.

We believe this publication can help. It offers practical, concrete tips and techniques for talking easily and openly with young children ages 8 to 12 about some very tough issues: sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, drugs and alcohol.

Some parents and caregivers may question the appropriateness of talking about such sensitive topics with young children. Maybe you're one of them. But consider this: our kids are already hearing about these issues from TV, movies, magazines and school friends. If we don't talk with them early and often -- and answer their questions -- they'll get their facts from someone else. And we'll have missed an important opportunity to offer our children information that's not only accurate, but also in sync with our own personal values and moral principles.

Make sense? We think so. So let's get started.

1. Start Early

Kids are hearing about and forced to cope with tough issues at increasingly early ages, often before they are ready to understand all aspects of these complicated ideas. Additionally, medical research and public health data tells us that when young children want information, advice and guidance, they turn to their parents first. Once they reach the teenage years, they tend to depend more on friends, the media and other outsiders for their information.

As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to talk with your child about these issues first, before anyone else can confuse your child with incorrect information or explanations that lack the sense of values you want to instill. We need to take advantage of this "window of opportunity" with young children and talk with them earlier and more often, particularly about tough issues like sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, alcohol and drugs.

2. Initiate Conversations With Your Child

While we want our children to feel comfortable enough to come to us with any questions and concerns -- and thus give us the opportunity to begin conversations -- this doesn't always occur. That's why it's perfectly okay -- at times even necessary -- to begin the discussions ourselves. TV and other media are great tools for this. Say, for instance, that you and your 12-year-old are watching TV together and the program's plot includes a

teenage pregnancy. After the show is over, ask your child what she thought of the program. Did she agree with how the teenagers behaved? Just one or two questions could help start a valuable discussion that comes from everyday circumstances and events.

Also, when speaking with your child, be sure to use words she can understand. Trying to explain AIDS to a 6-year-old with words like "transmission" and "transfusion" may not be as helpful as using simpler language. The best technique: use simple, short words and straightforward explanations.

If you have more than one child -- and your kids are widely spaced -- try to speak with them separately, even about the same subject. The reason? Children of varied ages are usually at different developmental levels, which means that they need different information, have different sensitivities and require a different vocabulary. What's more, older children will often dominate the discussion, which may prevent the younger ones from speaking up.

3. Even about Sex and Relationships

If you feel uncomfortable talking about such sensitive subjects -- particularly sex and relationships -- with your young child, you're not alone. Many parents feel awkward and uneasy, especially if they are anxious about the subject. But, for your kid's sake, try to overcome your nervousness and bring up the issue with your child. After all, our children are hearing about it both through the media and on the playground, and that information may not include the values that we want our kids to have.

4. Create an Open Environment

Young children want their parents to discuss difficult subjects with them. However, our kids will look to us for answers only if they feel we will be open to their questions. It's up to us to create the kind of atmosphere in which our children can ask any questions - on any subject - freely and without fear of consequence.

How do you create such an atmosphere? By being encouraging, supportive and positive. For example, if your child asks, "How many people have AIDS?" try not to answer with, "I don't know. Please just finish your lunch." No matter how busy you are respond with something like, "That's an interesting question, but I'm not sure. Let's go look it up." (FYI: Don't worry that if your children learn that you don't know everything, they won't look up to you. That's simply not true. Kids accept, "I don't know," and "let's go find out," and they are better responses than any inaccurate or misleading answers you may be tempted to offer.)

One more point: You don't need to answer all of your children's questions immediately. If your 10-year-old asks, "Mom, what's a condom?" while you're negotiating a tricky turn in

rush-hour traffic, it's perfectly okay for you to say something like, "That's an important question. But with all this traffic, I can't explain right now. Let's talk later, after dinner." And make sure you do.

5. Communicate your values

As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to be the first person to talk with your child about tough issues like drugs and violence before anyone else can confuse him with "just-the-facts" explanations that lack the sense of values and moral principles you want to instill. Likewise, when talking with your child about sex, remember to talk about more than "the birds and the bees," and communicate your values. Remember: research shows that children want and need moral guidance from their moms and dads, so don't hesitate to make your beliefs clear.

6. Listen to Your Child

How many times do we listen to our children while folding clothes, preparing for the next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? While that's understandable, it's important to find time to give kids our undivided attention. Listening carefully to our children builds self-esteem by letting our youngsters know that they're important to us and can lead to valuable discussions about a wide variety of sensitive issues.

Listening carefully also helps us better understand what our children really want to know as well as what they already understand. And it keeps us from talking above our youngsters' heads and confusing them even further. For example, suppose your child asks you what crack is. Before you answer, ask him what he thinks it is. If he says, "I think it's something you eat that makes you act funny," then you have a sense of his level of understanding and can adjust your explanations to fit.

Listening to our children and taking their feelings into account also helps us understand when they've had enough. Suppose you're answering your 9-year-old's questions about AIDS. If, after a while, he says, "I want to go out and play," stop the talk and re-introduce the subject at another time.

7. Try to be Honest

Whatever your children's ages, they deserve honest answers and explanations. It's what strengthens our children's ability to trust. Also, when we don't provide a straightforward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanations, which can be more frightening than any real, honest response we can offer.

While we may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with our child, try not to leave any big gaps either. When we do, children tend to fill in the blanks themselves, which can generate a good deal of confusion and concern.

8. Be Patient

Often, it can feel like forever before a youngster gets his story out. As adults, we're tempted to finish the child's sentence for him, filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sooner. Try to resist this impulse. By listening patiently, we allow our children to think at their own pace and we are letting them know that they are worthy of our time.

9. Use Everyday Opportunities to Talk

It's important to try to talk with your kids about tough issues often, but there isn't always time in the day to sit down for a long talk. Also, kids tend to resist formal discussions about today's toughest issues, often categorizing them as just another lecture from mom and dad. But if we use "talk opportunities," moments that arise in everyday life, as occasions for discussion, our children will be a lot less likely to tune us out. For instance, a newspaper item about a child expelled from school for carrying a gun to class can help you start a discussion on guns and violence. A public service TV commercial can give you an opportunity to talk about AIDS.

10. Talk About it Again. And Again.

Since most young children can only take in small bits of information at any one time, they won't learn all they need to know about a particular topic from a single discussion. That's why it's important to let a little time pass, then ask the child to tell you what she remembers about your conversation. This will help you correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts.

Finally, in an effort to absorb all they want to know, children often ask questions again and again over time -- which can test any parent's nerves. But such repetition is perfectly normal, so be prepared and tolerant. Don't be afraid to initiate discussions repeatedly, either. Patience and persistence will serve you and your child well.